



FRANCIS WILSON.

PLAYS AND PLAYERS OF THE DAY.

By Morris Bacheller.

OF the two great divisions of the drama, tragedy is today surprisingly similar to what it was in the days of the ancient Greeks, while comedy has in the mean time been the subject of a remarkable evolution. That evolution has proceeded with especial rapidity within recent years. To find the best and noblest exemplifications of tragedy we have to go back two centuries to the master works of Shakspeare. A

few exceptional comedies there are of Sheridan's or Goldsmith's, whose popularity has not diminished with the lapse of time, though many generations have come and gone since they were penned. But they may be counted upon the fingers of a single hand, and only serve to emphasize the rarity of comedies that can hold the boards for more than a few seasons.

The development of comedy, and

especially of its more farcical branches, is, indeed, the chief feature of recent dramatic history. Attribute it to a reaction from the increased tension of modern business life, or assign what sociological cause you will, the fact remains that the general demand is for plays whose aim and object is to amuse. It cannot be maintained that this tendency is restricted to the less educated class of theater goers. On the contrary, it is at houses that are especially frequented by people of wealth and fashion that the supremacy of comedy is most assured. Melodrama is still the most drawing card in the theaters patronized by the lower million.

The advance of comedy has been multiform. Farces of greater ingenuity and more sustained brilliance of workmanship are written by the playwrights of today than by their forerunners. They are interpreted upon the boards by more finished artists, and with a stage setting that constantly becomes more complete and costly. The comedian has a higher professional and even social standing now than a generation ago, and he may secure a much greater degree of renown, with its financial accompaniment of ample earnings. And all this arises from the workings of the old law of supply and demand. Every art that can contribute to the embellishment of its presentation becomes the handmaid of comedy. Music is pressed into its service, and the result is that characteristic phase of latter day theatricals, the burletta.

There was a time, and not so very long ago, when the predecessors of Francis Wilson and De Wolf Hopper were set down as "low comedians," and relegated to an artistic rank slightly superior to that of the circus clown. Every one knows the contrast in the position of the modern apostles of Momus. Attend the theaters, read the newspapers, listen to the comment of the club rooms, and you will speedily be convinced that they are the theatrical lions of the hour, that among all the constella-

tions of the dramatic firmament their planet is in the ascendant. Nor is there anything in this state of affairs to justify the pessimistic philosopher in an outcry against the alleged decadence of the stage. The popular taste for comedy is neither a degraded nor a perverted one, and the success of its leading exponents has been won upon their merits.

The comic star rises to the zenith by an ascent as difficult and laborious as that which leads to high rank in any other profession. *Ars est celare artem*, and the apparently easy spontaneity with which he develops the humor of a stage situation is the fruit of conscientious study and persistent practice. There are no more painstaking actors than the two typical burlesquers who as the Regent of Siam and the Merry Monarch have during the recent months reigned successively at the Broadway Theater, New York.

Francis Wilson, who recently succeeded his brother potentate, has worked his way up from the lowest rounds of the theatrical ladder. His first appearance was with Sandford's minstrel company in a sketch called "The Brians," which was played in Philadelphia. Young as he was—only a boy in his teens—Wilson made something of a hit. This was enough to secure him plenty of remunerative engagements with minstrel troupes, as a member of which he traveled all over the country. He was ambitious, however, for work of a higher order, and to secure a foothold upon the legitimate stage he undertook a minor part in a company that appeared at the Chestnut Street Theater, in Philadelphia. Here again his talents declined to conceal themselves under a bushel. In the role of *Lamp*, a broken down actor in "Wild Oats," he carried with him upon the stage an old foil, the last relic of better days, and from this seemingly unpromising article he managed to extract so much quiet humor that the audience was convulsed and the star of the piece entered a formal complaint at this interference with his supremacy.



DE WOLF HOPPER.

The following years saw the young actor steadily advancing in his art, but experiencing various ups and downs of fortune, which wound up with the "stranding" of his company, Mitchell's Pleasure Party, in San Francisco. Next he reappeared in Philadelphia—let us hope that he was not obliged to reach it on foot—as a member of the McCaull troupe, with which he played in his first comic opera, "The Queen's Lace Handkerchief."

From this point his career has been one of unchecked prosperity. He was speedily recognized as a comic opera star of no ordinary luster. In such standard parts as that of *Cadeaux* in *Erminie* he achieved a reputation and a popularity that finally led him to organize a company of his own, with which he has even eclipsed his previous successes in "The Oolah" and "The Merry Monarch."

De Wolf Hopper's popularity has



MODJESKA AS ROSALIND.

been won still more rapidly than that of his brother comedian. He is the youngest of our successful actors, as well as one of the most original in his methods, but he has been upon the boards long enough to gain a thorough dramatic training and a varied experience. It was his enthusiasm for private theatricals, and his success in them, that led him upon the professional stage—in spite of the fact that he had been educated for the law. He was only twenty when, in 1880, he appeared as the leading spirit of the Criterion Comedy Company, which had a fair measure of prosperity, presenting such standard plays as "Caste" and "Our Boys." When it disbanded he was successively with Edward Harrigan in "The Blackbird," and at the Madison Square Theater under the management of Daniel Frohman. At this latter house, in the parts of *Pittacus Green* in "Hazel Kirke," and *Oliver Hathaway* in "May Blossom," he gained the approbation of metropolitan theater goers to a degree that was greatly enhanced during the next five years, which he passed as a member of the McCaull opera company. His last season with that organization was marked by a suc-

cess as *Casimir* in "Clover" that showed an advance upon anything he had previously done. "Wang," which was so notably well received at the Broadway Theater during the past summer, was his first independent venture.

There are those who cherish the idea that the continued success of actors like Messrs. Wilson and Hopper is largely due to the prestige of their reputation and the indulgence shown by the public toward established favorites. They tell us that it matters little what may be the merits of the piece or its staging, the star is sure to have a following sufficient to fill the box office with a golden stream. He might almost as well dispense with the libretto altogether, they say, for as soon as he opens his lips to speak the audience roars with laughter.

So far as it denies the necessity for care and labor, thought and skill, in the preparation and presentation of a farce, this theory is fundamentally mistaken. It has again and again been proved that no names upon the playbill, however eminent, can make a poor play successful. The theater going public may not be infallible,



MODJESKA AS PORTIA.



MADAME HELENA MODJESKA.

but it is too discriminating to accept an unpalatable article because it bears a title of repute. The later popularity of "The Oolah" has obliterated recollection of the fact that on its first night its reception was not enthusiastic. The critics thought and said that Wilson had made a mistake. But the comedian set himself at work to improve the piece, cutting here, adding there, and interlining and changing until in a hundred small but yet not unimportant points it was a different and a better play. This is merely a single example of those expenditures of

thought and care that escape the hasty critic, and many similar incidents might be cited. For instance, the remarkably flexible voice of which De Wolf Hopper makes such effective use has received almost as careful training as a prima donna's.

It would hardly be fair to the theatrical situation of the day to picture it only as a regime of farce comedy. The burlesque is indeed the most characteristic phase of the *fin de siècle* dramatic development, but it is not by any means sole monarch of the stage. The avenue that leads to the applause of the world



MODJESKA AS JULIE DE MORTIMER.

of culture is still open to interpreters of the art that can call forth tears as well as laughter.

No better proof of this can be given than the marked favor with which Madame Modjeska has been everywhere received during her comparatively brief career upon the American stage. It is true that she had already gained a wide reputation in Europe when she abandoned her profession and came to the New World with her husband, Count Bozenta. They had in view the establishment of a colony of their Polish fellow countrymen in Southern California. The scheme was probably somewhat Utopian. At any rate it was abandoned, and the countess, under her earlier name of Modjeska, fitted herself for the English speaking stage.

San Francisco was the scene of her debut, and "Adrienne Lecouvreur" the play. She has since acted in all the leading cities of America, besides making two visits to London. Her repertory includes a wide range of pieces of the highest intellectual order. As a delineator of Shaksperian heroines she is unsurpassed, and her appearances with Edwin

Booth in the great dramatic classics have been among the most notable events of recent seasons. The intensity of her *Juliet*, the grace and dignity of her *Portia*, the pathos of her *Ophelia*, and the Arcadian naïveté of her *Rosalind* have borne witness to her rare endowment of histrionic talent. Among other plays in which she has taken the leading part are "Camille," "Mary Stuart," "Juanna," "Frou-Frou," "Odette," and "Richelieu." In the last named, which she played in conjunction with Booth, she scored one of her most notable successes as *Julie de Mortimer*.

Long as she has been upon the stage of two continents, Madame Modjeska's impersonations of *Juliet* or *Beatrice* have all the fresh charm of youth. With exceptional skill in the portrayal of strong emotion she combines a lightness of touch and a graceful refinement that are peculiarly characteristic. The fact that she has never succeeded in removing from her English speech the last faint trace of a foreign accent, is to many of her parts rather an added interest than a blemish.



MODJESKA AS OPHELIA.